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EXCLUSIVE: ERIC BERRYMAN TALKS STEEL HAMMER, HIS BUCKET LIST, & MORE

Posted On 01 Dec 2015 / 0 Comments



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The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) presents Steel Hammer in its New York premiere December 2-6 as part of its Next Wave Festival. Steel Hammer, according to the BAM website, “distills the discrepancies of over 200 variants of the classic ballad” and legend of John Henry into “a theatrical post-minimalist mountain-music hybrid.” Broadway Black had the opportunity for an exclusive interview with Eric Berryman, who plays John Henry.



Broadway Black (BB): Who is Eric Berryman?

Eric Berryman (EB): *I'm from a Baltimore arts family. My great grandparents owned a jazz club in the 1960s in Baltimore. I went to a Magnet school in Baltimore and was raised by three generations of women: my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. I'm from the Penn North area in Baltimore. As a frame of reference, the CVS that was burned down during the protests surrounding the death of Freddie Gray was in my neighborhood. I went to the Baltimore School for the Arts, alma mater of Tracie Thoms, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Tupac, among others. I then went to Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh and took outside work, becoming Equity at 18. I was cast in August Wilson's plays in repertory, billed as stage readings, at the Kennedy Center in 2008, directed by Lou Bellamy. After graduating in 2011, the last four years have been an uncommon journey. I have always been of the mindset that actors did work. Broadway is great but is not an end goal of mine. I just always want to be telling stories. So I've done lots of regional theatre and was off-Broadway last year, in addition to performing internationally.*



BB: Steel Hammer tells the story of John Henry. What does the legend say?

EB: John Henry was a Black railroad worker in the post-Civil War era. He drove steel through the mountains. As the Ballad tells, he faced a steam engine, raced it, beat the machine, and then dies. You get that story through dance, music, singing, and acting. There are 4 different playwrights (Kia Corthon, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor) who have composed the story in their own words. It is not a linear story necessarily, but nothing like what you would get through the text. What interested us is that there are so many different versions and how different they all are. So what ties them together? He always had a woman. He was always the best. In our retelling, it serves as the newest ballad of John Henry and maybe the longest. We tell the story in various ways over and over again. Sometimes through movement sequences, text, dances, clogging, but the basic story is that one man has to do something great. When he falls, the community is there to pick him up so he does succeed.

The legend is something you know about from Disney shorts and it's what fascinated me as a lover of Black history and Black classical history. It was about style, history, the early formation of a way of speaking, folklore and various cultures. It made me happy that we had a folklore that was mainstream in a sense. African American history has a lot of African history; for example, the Flying Monkeys are from Yoruba. I consider John Henry mainstream Black folklore like Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed. John Henry was ours. I've always had an interest and love of that so when I heard about Steel Hammer, I knew I wanted to be a part of that.

BB: Because John Henry is folklore, how do you make it relevant for today?

EB: I am happy that Steel Hammer is happening. Once upon a time, John Henry was a name that was known throughout the land. He meant something to people, especially those below the Mason-Dixon line. It's a bedtime story, especially to our grandparents. That consciousness has gone away in the world. This is a memory revived and thought of anew. It is more relevant and needed now more than any other time.

We explore the facts and the fictions. John Henry was most likely a forced laborer. One version says he was thrown on the side of the road in an

unmarked grave after his death. With what's happening now, the piece means something different. Our director Anne Bogart said the play is about Black Lives Matter. It is essentially folklore, oral tradition. But remember this man. How many people do we not know about who died? We knew about Rodney King, but how many others do we not know about before him? We happen to know about this one guy, but how many more are out there?

The playwrights have done an amazing job. It is the story of an eternal Black prisoner who's been in jail for over 200 years. He is larger than life. How right of a time it is now to talk about this. There is new art about Blacks in prisons. My fascination comes from the root of that. And how Blacks are mass incarcerated, from a genius idea after the Emancipation Proclamation, to get free labor. Put Blacks in jail on a mass scale and sell them out to plantations and to chain gangs. Make up laws. "Pig laws" must be reinvented, so misdemeanors became felonies to keep Blacks in prison and keep a captive workforce.

BB: What can you tell us about Steel Hammer?

EB: Bang on a Can All-Stars are a contemporary music group including pianos, cellos, clarinet, upright bass, guitar and percussionist. Composer Julia Wolfe won the Pulitzer for music this year. In fact, Hammer was a Pulitzer finalist. There are six musicians and three female voices (Emily Eagen, Katie Geissinger & Molly Quinn). The performance is a deconstructed riff off of John Henry. If you're used to the song, you're not going to hear it in the entirety in any version. Her music is a deconstructed minimalist, Phillip Glass-sounding, almost meditation on John Henry.

BB: What is next for you?

EB: After Steel Hammer. I will be back at BAM from Jan 16–Feb 6, 2016 performing in The Glory of the World, a tribute to the Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton. It's a wacky play. With 17 men on stage, "Trouble ensues."

BB: You've performed around the world. What is on your bucket list?

EB: I have no bucket list. There is only one August Wilson play that has never made it to Broadway and that's Jitney. I am now the perfect age to be in Jitney on Broadway. When performing the cycle of August Wilson plays at the Kennedy Center, we had shirts made that dubbed us "Wilsonian Soldiers." I consider myself to be a young foot soldier but to be on the shirt was an honor and I continue in the desire to be a Wilsonian Soldier.

BB: What advice would you give to young artists of color?

EB: As Spike Lee said when accepting his Honorary Oscar. You have to be 10 times better than your counterparts to get in the door. And you must actually be good. You must actually be a sponge and absorb everything there is to absorb. It's not that the talent has to be 10 times better, but the work ethic and discipline must be. The work that you put into the craft has to be 10 times better to be even considered. Whatever that means to you. Everybody has some kind of talent. What will make someone stand out is their work ethic and discipline. That you notice.

Secondly, you must have an awareness of your own individual history and culture and family history, and the history of those that came before you. You may not have lived the same experience, but you must be aware of it. You don't have to be from the streets to play it. But be aware of the spectrum of the Black experience. Be aware of how you're perceived. That will help you know how to play an experience you haven't had. And know how to change someone's mind of you. To give somebody what they want. Once when I auditioned, they made me do one of my pieces "Black" or a "yo boy," a little "more urban," because obviously I didn't come into the room like that, but they wanted to see how versatile I could be. There is dignity in that: Being able to give them what you look like but to give them something to change their mind. Denzel plays roles now because he's accepted as a guy. But his early roles were exclusively Black people. The balance is that it's a flux. It's not like you're going to stop playing Black roles. Rather, you're looking for acceptance. Be considered "the actor." Because you possess this skin, you can do what others can't, but you can transcend that.

It is the same with speech: you want the awareness. You have the training

to sound any way you want to. It is cultural awareness. It's a choice. It is giving the dignity to the character. It's painful to hear an actor who is unable to tap into August Wilson's vernacular and poetry. They may not have that understanding. Why not want to have all of that — every tool possible at your disposal so you don't take a check out of your pocket. The artist as a whole wants to have as many tools as possible so any role that comes up, they can do.

SITI Company is an ensemble theater company based in New York that tours extensively throughout the United States and internationally. SITI is dedicated to the creation of new work, the training of theater artists, and to international collaboration. Since its founding in 1992, SITI Company has redefined contemporary theater in the United States through an innovative approach to collaboration, cultural exchange and actor training. The company's newest project is a dramatic incarnation of 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winner Julia Wolfe's profound art ballad Steel Hammer, which has its New York Premiere At BAM's Next Wave Festival, December 2–6. tickets can be purchased [HERE](#).

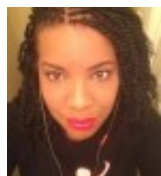
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